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Wendlebury (Alchester Fortress): Headquarters, Granary and Timber Bridge (SP 570 203)

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**UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, INSTITUTE OF
ARCHAEOLOGY AND UNIVERSITY OF
LEICESTER, SCHOOL OF ARCHAEOLOGY
AND ANCIENT HISTORY**

**Wendlebury (Alchester Fortress): Headquarters,
Granary and Timber Bridge (SP 570 203)**

Eberhard Sauer

The Annexe Headquarters (Trenches 36-40)

New evidence has emerged to suggest that the large military timber building, before the 2002 season tentatively considered to be a military workshop (*fabrica*), is more likely to be a headquarters building (*principia*). First, the shape of the courtyard, already explored in the previous season, supports this re-interpretation; it extended both, to the west and the east beyond the limits predicted prior to the season. While we cannot as yet be certain whether or not it encompassed the entire width of the building, its apparently longitudinal shape would be less unusual for a headquarters building than for a workshop. South of the courtyard there was a range of rooms along the road, the southernmost part of which was destroyed by civilian-period roadside ditches. The rooms on the north side of the courtyard could be shown to be more regularly spaced than we had assumed previously. The question arises whether the rectangular pit might even have been the strong-room below the regimental shrine. It would be interesting to know whether it is in the axis of symmetry of the building as is mostly the case in Roman military headquarters (Fellmann 1983), but in order to decide this question we will first have to establish the western and eastern extent of the complex. It thus seems possible that the range of rooms north of the courtyard formed the administrative range of the headquarters building. Interestingly, this range of rooms was separated from another range by a regular aisle (later subdivided and reduced in width). This feature has a parallel in the contemporary *principia* of Valkenburg (Van Giffen 1948, plan 8; Johnson 1983, 129 fig. 98), thus offering support for the identification of the building as an early form of a headquarters building. It is disputed whether or not the back range of rooms at Valkenburg (and Alchester?) may have served as living quarters for the officer(s) in charge of the garrison of the compound (Johnson 1983, 127; Schoenberger 1978, 45 with references).

It should be pointed out that there is no ultimate certainty as yet about the interpretation of the building as a *principia*. It would seem odd that a water-basin was transformed into a strong room. Yet, apart from this short-lived water basin (which was quite possibly solely used for mixing the daub for timber frame buildings in the annexe during the initial stages of construction) abandoned before completion of the building in its earliest phase, there is as yet no clear evidence for industrial activity in the building as one would expect in the case of a workshop. An interpretation as an officers house (*praetorium*) is not likely either. The building now measures 45-48m north-south, we do not know how much was destroyed by the civilian roadside ditches. Its west-east

extent exceeds 55m, and we have not yet found its limits, neither in the west nor in the east. If it was indeed symmetrical with the rectangular pit being in its central axis (as suggested above), its west-east extent must even have exceeded 65m. Even 55 x 45m, however, seems too large for an officers house in the annexe and the architecture anyway points rather towards a headquarters.

Fig 18: [Alchester, Prehistoric and early Roman military structures ...]

- 1: Trench 24 with middle ditch as additional obstacle near the corner
- 2: Traces of the rampart
- 3: Possible earlier stream bed of the Gagle Brook of unknown date
- 4: Trenches 20 northern extension, 25, 26, 29, 30 and 36-40: large timber building with courtyard and probable strong room: a separate annexe headquarters?
- 5: Mid-1st century drainage ditch
- 6: Courtyard
- 7: Aisle
- 8: Trench 23: gate of AD 44
- 9: Water supply gully
- 10: Water supply ditch of c AD 44/45 filled in before construction of the timber building
- 11: Drainage gullies
- 12: Trench 20: long timber ground sill, post holes and hearths (late Roman/ post-Roman plough damage in this area)
- 13: Trench 31
- 14: Trench 22
- 15: Mid-1st century drainage ditch
- 16: Extent of geophysical survey
- 17: Trench 28 with traces of dense military occupation
- 18: Magnetic anomalies: ovens?
- 19: Trench 21
- 20: Extent of geophysical survey
- 21: Drainage ditches (for round houses?)
- 22: Mid 1st century ditches excavated in the 1920s and 1974 (the eastern defences?) c 320m east of postulated western ditches
- 23: Probable location of west gate (of AD 43?) in the area of the later civilian town wall gate; excavations in Trench 32 indicate that its remains would almost certainly reach beneath the water table
- 24: Trench 32 (only the area where military-period levels were reached is plotted here): two mid-1st century drainage ditches with waterlogged material, one with oak posts, probably belonging to a small bridge
- 25: Possible traces of bottom of inner fortress ditch, largely destroyed by 14.40m wide late 2nd century town wall ditch
- 26: Trenches E4 and 33-35: granary: parallel timber ground sills (with gaps where destroyed by later features)
- 27: 19th century farm yard
- 28: Extent of geophysical survey
- 29: Double ditch: the southern defences of the main fortress?
- 30: Extent of geophysical survey
- 31: Trench 27

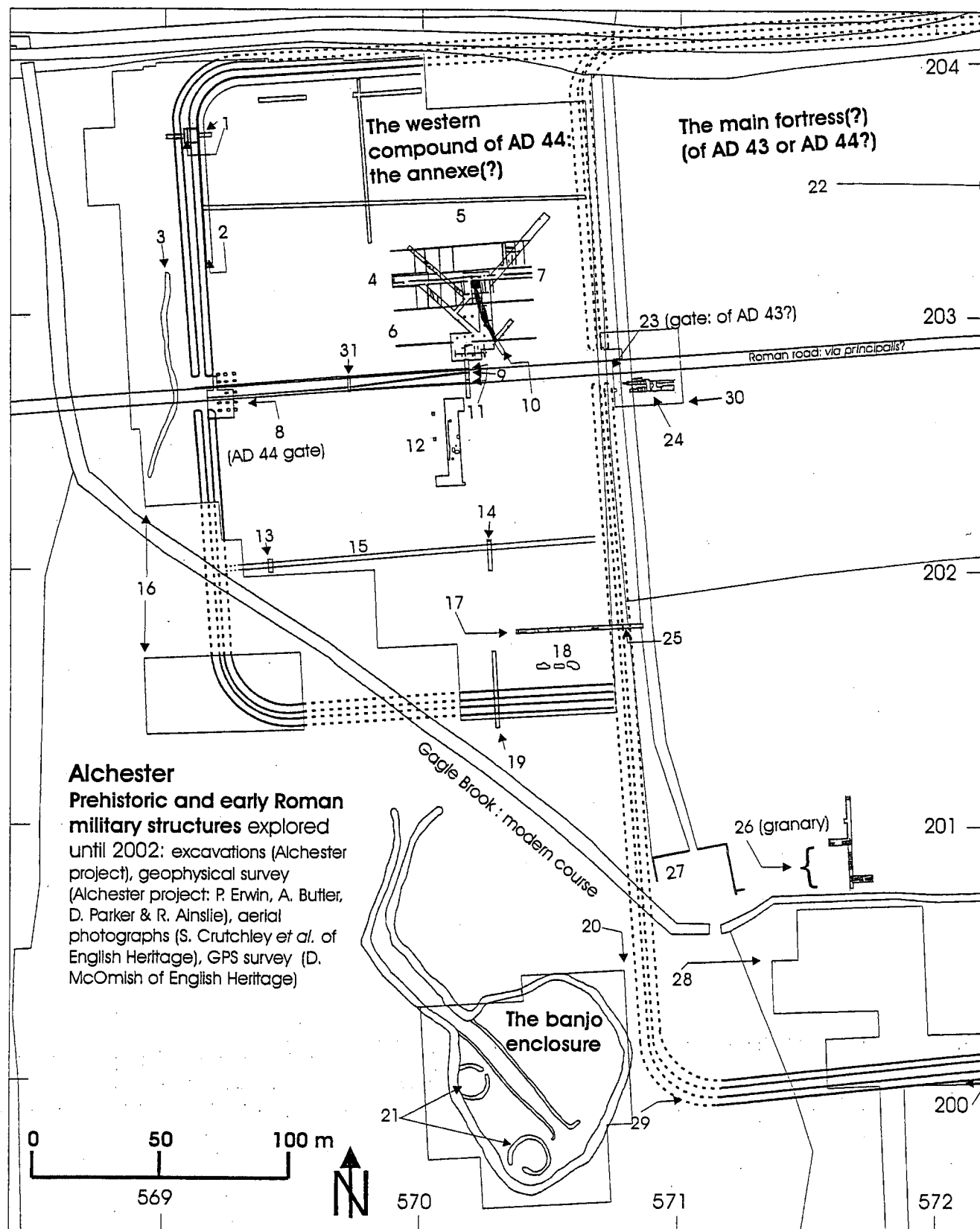


Fig 18. See legend opposite.

Headquarters' building (*principia*)(?) (or a large *fabrica*?) In the Alchester annexe

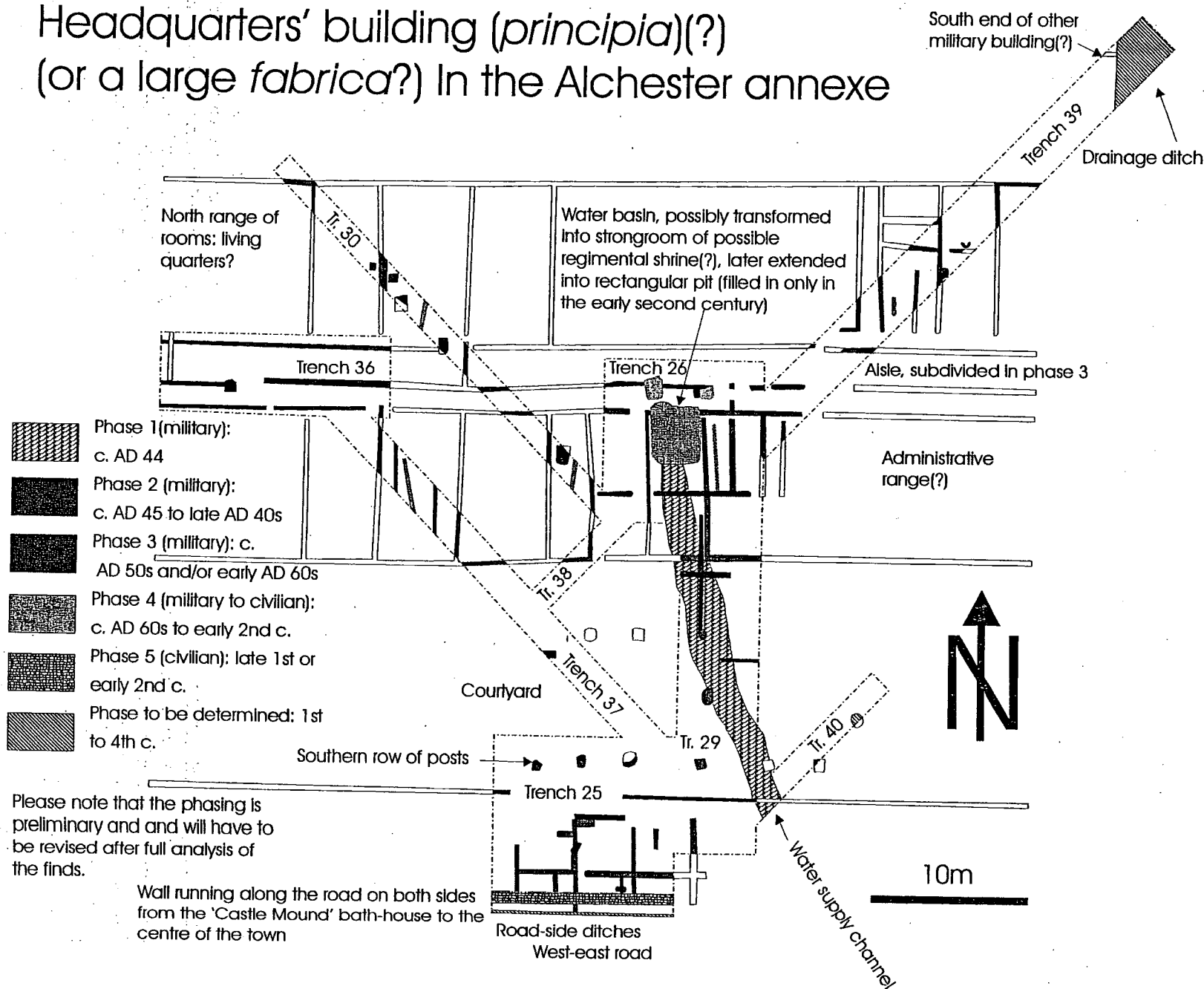


Fig 19.

The building cannot be the original headquarters for the whole compound as this is, in Roman forts and fortresses, always at the T-junction of the main roads. However, its location makes perfect sense for the separate headquarters of an annexe where there was only one road and thus no T-junction. That the annexe had its separate headquarters is of major interest. The density of finds and beamslots also elsewhere in the annexe suggests dense occupation and the size of c 4ha suggests a garrison of c. 1,000 men. Is it possible that two quingenary units (ie units of c 500 men each) were transferred to Alchester in AD 44 while the main fortress (for c 3,000 to 4,000 men to judge by its size) had already been in existence since AD 43?

With over 55m west-east extent the Alchester complex exceeds, as far as I am aware, all contemporary headquarters in auxiliary forts in size. I am only aware of one *principia* of the first or early 2nd century outside a legionary fortress of similar size, namely in the fort for c 1,000 horsemen at Heidenheim which was the largest base between the Rhine, the Danube and the Limes from the AD 90s to the AD 150s. This makes one wonder, if the interpretation of the building at Alchester as a headquarters is accepted, whether a separate command structure for the units in the annexe to those in the main fortress (even if dependent and subordinate) is a sufficient explanation for a building of such extraordinary dimensions.

Alternatively, Alchester may have assumed a key function in the conquest and administration of the south-east of Britain, and the construction of the annexe to an existing base may mark that by AD 44 the focus of military policy had shifted to central Britain. It is interesting to note that John Peddie (1987, 132) had argued that Alchester or Dorchester-on-Thames were the most suitable sites for the headquarter base of the governor, Aulus Plautius, once much of the south-east of Britain was under Roman control. Peddie, a retired soldier himself, will have based this hypothesis on strategic considerations and he proposed it before there had been any firm evidence for a military base at Alchester at all. Indeed, Alchester's location at one of the most central road junctions in south-east Britain predestined it for a wider administrative role, even if it is impossible as yet to tell whether it was quite as important as Peddie had suggested.

The Granary (Trenches 33-35)

Two further trenches were excavated to explore the granary, discovered in 2001, and a third (Trench 35) in its vicinity. The interpretation of the parallel beamslots (ie wooden foundations) as supporting the raised floor of a granary is based on numerous parallels, even though the spacing of the beamslots is more narrow than one would normally expect; nobody has, in any case, as yet been able to advance an alternative interpretation for the remarkably parallel and regularly aligned beamslots in this particular location. Little pottery was recovered from the fills, but a sherd of a Claudian or Neronian butt beaker from the fill of one of the slots supports an early date. The relative stratigraphy equally points to a very early date: in the second phase the slots are

cut by military-type post-holes and a beamslot (the latter at a right angle to them). They are sealed later by a cultivation layer which itself underlies the late second-century town wall rampart. That there are at least two phases of military occupation suggests that not only in the annexe, but also in the main fortress the army remained for some time, though not enough material has as yet been recovered from the main fortress to be sure about the precise date of its withdrawal. It is impossible to establish on the basis of our present evidence whether the main fortress was abandoned at or before the mid AD 60s (the latest possible date for the abandonment of the annexe) or whether it remained occupied into the late AD 60s and AD 70s.

The granary proved to be larger than we had expected. It measured at least 16.9m north-south and at least 15.7m west-east, and it extends at least in the west and east beyond the limits of our trenches. Unless we are dealing with two parallel buildings, the border being precisely where the later civilian drainage ditch in Trench 33 cuts the beamslots, it is wider than any other timber granary in Britain with the possible exception of one 18m wide granary at Corbridge (Manning 1975). Much larger timber granaries, however, are known from the Augustan supply base of Roedgen in Germany (Schoenberger 1976, 24-7). Despite the fact that Alchester is located at one of the major crossroads in southern Britain, one is tempted to think that the large granary served the garrison rather than having a wider supply function, especially in consideration of the fact that Alchester had no access to a sea or river port.

The civilian period features include two minor gullies, presumably on either side of a road, a major drainage ditch, several late post holes, the town wall and its rampart. Most interestingly, two wells were discovered in Trench 35. The high water table in the vicinity of the Gagle Brook made it easy to dig wells in this area. Unfortunately they had no timber (or stone) lining. It will, undoubtedly, be possible to establish a fairly precise chronology for the wells, once the pottery has been fully analysed. Trench 35 also demonstrated that post-Roman ploughing appears to have destroyed all except the deep features in this particular area. One possible shadow of a beamslot was discovered towards its northern end. Only the bottom 4cm survived, yet in absolute terms its bottom is at the same level as that of the beamslots in Trench 33. On the whole it is fair to conclude that we cannot be certain whether there were few features of Roman military and civilian date in Trench 35 or whether they have merely been destroyed. The significantly lower density of finds of Roman civilian and military date from Trenches 33, 34 and 35 (which included, however, one fragment of scale armour, one part of a shield binding and one spear head), suggests that, unsurprisingly, there was never as much activity in the area of the granary as in the area of Trench 32.

The early Roman structures near the west gate (Trench 32)

This trench had been excavated with the intention of confirming or refuting the hypothesis that the main fortress

Trenches E.4, 33, 34 & 35

Please note that more precise dating of the features will be possible after full analysis of the pottery

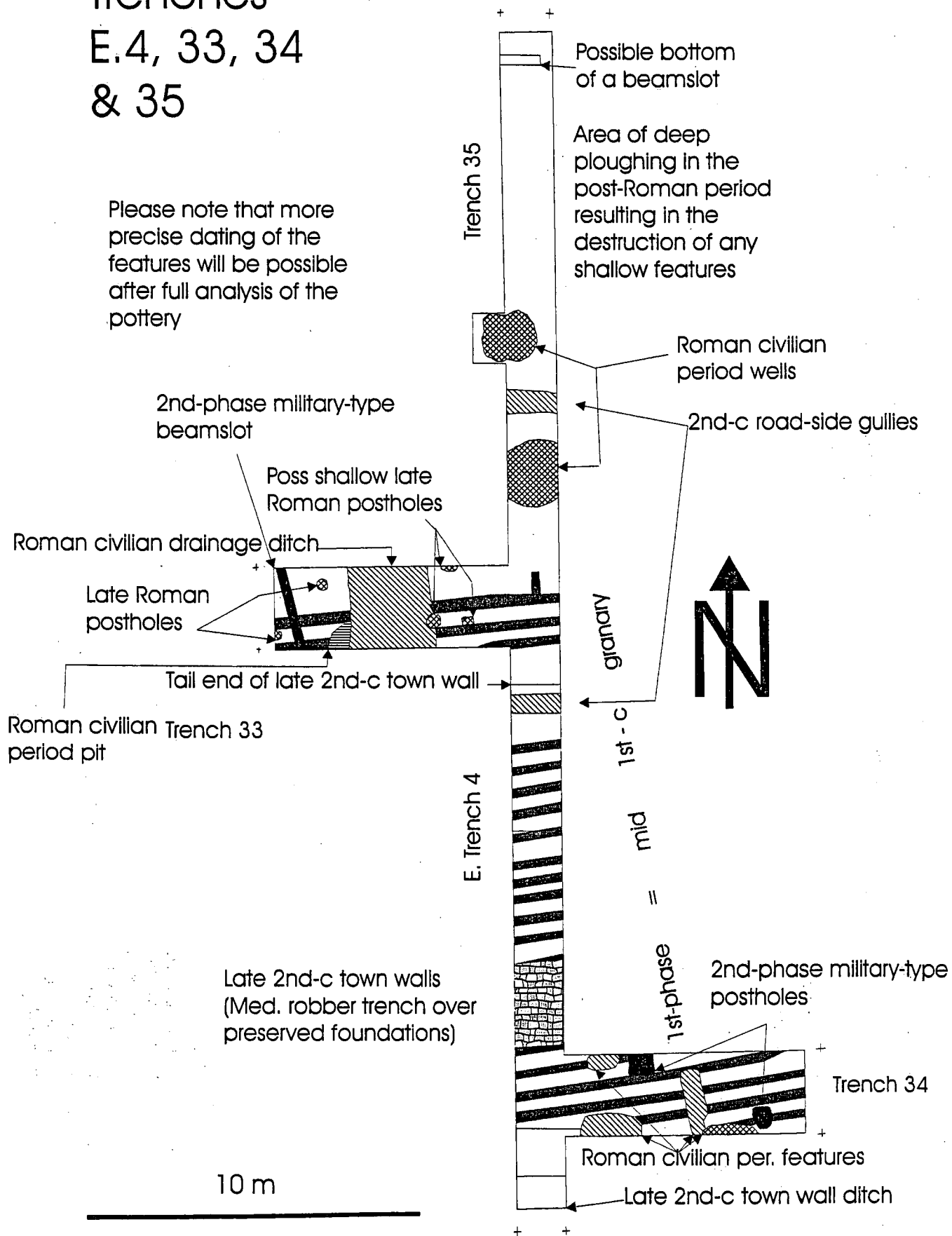


Fig 20.

Trench 32 in the military period (AD 40s to c. AD 60?)

Likely

Low resistance feature (gap between town wall and tail end of the late 2nd c.-rampart) before the excavation erroneously interpreted as the Inner fortress ditch

location of

west gate of

Road

the main



H = hearth
P = post hole

Approximate position of eastern edge of the 14.40 m wide late 2nd c.-town wall ditch (based on its relative position to the town wall as in trench 28), probably incorporating both fortress ditches (not just one as thought before the 2002 season)

fortress

Extent of the area where military layers or the natural were reached

Findspot of wine strainer

Bottom of drainage gully flowing E

Beamslots respecting W-E Gully

Bottom of main drainage gully

Beamslot

Beamslots

Preserved oak posts, prob. of bridge over gully - military or early civilian (not yet dendro-dated)

10 m

Oxfordshire

was underneath the town, and that the compound in the west formed its annexe. Furthermore, it was meant to establish whether significant waterlogged deposits at risk from desiccation survived underneath the town.

Because of the well preserved wall running right through the middle of our trench, the area where we could excavate down to military levels was significantly reduced. It is beyond doubt that there was intensive activity in the mid-1st century in Trench 32 as is indicated not only by a high concentration of military equipment, but also by the density of military structures. The beamslots and postholes allow several different interpretations. The substantial north-south-running drainage ditch argues against their attribution to a single building. The size of the area excavated down to this level is too small for a reliable identification of the precise function of the structures. *Tabernae* (rows of rooms of diverse function), a regular feature along the roads of legionary fortresses, might be one possible interpretation of the small compartments. An association of the westernmost beamslots with the rear revetment of a rampart another, though the fact that the two postholes on either side of the north-south-running drainage ditch have an identical sterile fill and are similar in shape and in a neat west-east alignment suggests that they belong to the same feature. Whether this was a bridge over the drainage channel or a wooden colonnade along the *via principalis* as frequently observed in legionary fortresses cannot be decided. Furthermore, while three beamslots could be observed south of the wall and three beamslot terminals on its north side, the two eastern ones are clearly in a different alignment, adding further difficulties in their interpretation. All three of the beamslot terminals, incidentally, come to a butt end before reaching the edge of the west-east running drainage gully. This observation and the early fill of the drainage gully suggest that they are contemporary; the gully may even have served the drainage of the construction resting on the beamslots. The most plausible, but by no means certain, interpretation may be that the beamslots west of the north-south drainage ditch formed parts of a wooden ramp (*ascensus*) providing access to the military rampart near the fortress west gate.

The trench failed to locate any posts of the west gate. In hindsight this is most likely to be due to a misinterpretation resulting in our missing the gate by a few metres only. A linear low resistance feature traced by geophysical survey had been mistaken to be the inner fortress ditch. This interpretation seemed to be supported by the fact that in 1974 a mid-first century ditch was found within the town walls (Young 1975, 138-41), and we expected to find the mirror image of this in the west. This, however, was probably indeed a drainage ditch, similar to the north-south-running one we found in Trench 32. It seems increasingly likely now that the 14.4m wide town wall ditch, explored in Trench 28 in 2001, incorporated (and destroyed) not just the outer ditch, but both the inner and outer fortress ditches. If so, the gate is most likely to be underneath its civilian successor or in its immediate vicinity. Both at the east gate of Gloucester (Heighway 1980 and 1983) and the east gate of Lincoln

(Thompson and Whitwell 1973), the stone towers of the civilian gate overlie their timber predecessors of the military period. Even if the rampart at Alchester may have been demolished after the withdrawal of the army, since it did not enjoy the same status as Gloucester or Lincoln, the ditches and the road still would, presumably, have led to a similar location of the military and the civilian gate. It seems increasingly likely that, in parallel to other Roman towns with comparably rectangular plan, the Roman military timber gate is underneath the gate of the civilian period.

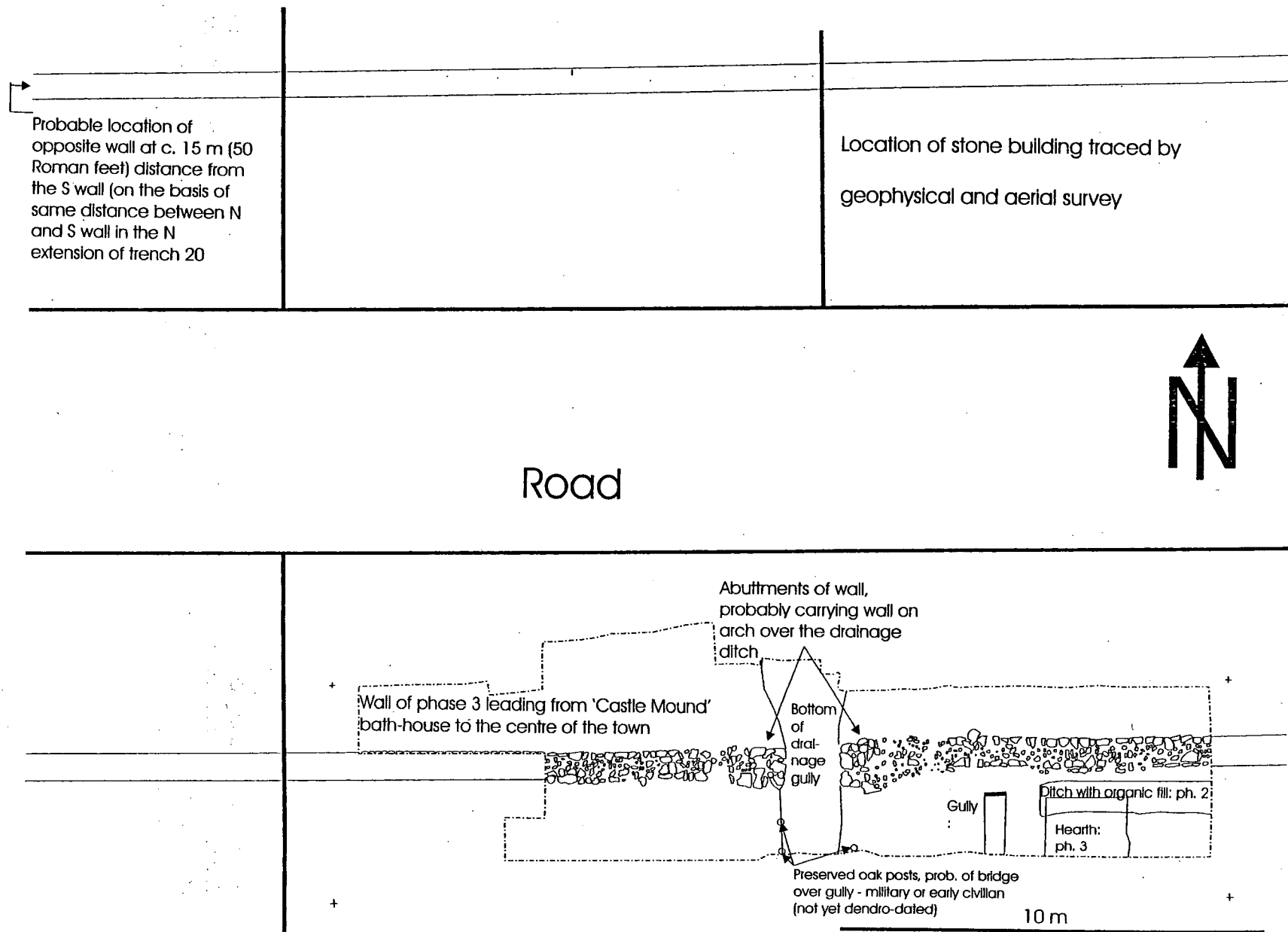
Trench 32 has certainly succeeded in establishing that there are important waterlogged remains in the area. The military layers are at a similar depth in relation to the water table as on the meadow in the west. If we indeed missed the gate by only a few metres, the gate posts (unless pulled out in antiquity) are likely to survive. Three well preserved oak posts were recovered from the north-south running drainage ditch. They, presumably, supported a small timber bridge and may just be large enough for tree-ring dates, though probably not precise ones, since they have been squared. They have already been submitted to Ian Tyers at Sheffield, but the results are not yet known. Other waterlogged finds include a stake with rope tied around the bent end, and archaeobotanic remains. A late Iron Age or early Roman provincial wine strainer with fish head spout, almost identical to the specimen from Felpersham (Kennett 1976), was discovered in a drainage gully of the military phase. Most remarkably, Dr Mark Robinson was still able to identify celery seeds in the fill of the wine strainer. Passages in Pliny's natural history (14, 104; 19, 188; 20, 111; 20, 115; 20, 264; 22, 62) and the *Geoponica* (7, 26, 4; 8, 16) confirm that celery-flavoured wine was widely drunk and used for medicinal purposes. It seems thus highly likely that we found the remains of a Mediterranean recipe, prepared in this vessel, a fascinating glimpse into the introduction of foreign lifestyle to Britain.

Evidence for a recent lowering of the water table and the threat of gradual destruction of parts of Alchesters waterlogged archive

Worryingly, the preservation of the seeds was no longer good. The west-east running ditch was in its entirety above the summer water table, and the strainer was not found at its deepest point, but 155-215mm above the water table. In the assessment of Dr Graham Morgan, Dr Mark Robinson and myself the preservation of organic material within the strainer is due to recent waterlogged conditions and not due to bronze corrosion, even if, as Mark Robinson pointed out, the vessel could have slowed down disintegration of organic material in its interior. Mark Robinson noticed that in some waterlogged deposits recent roots could be observed pointing to a recent and not an ancient decline. Wood survived in Trench 32 up to 135mm above the present water table (three days after the water had last been pumped out and when the water-table should have reached equilibrium again). Already in January 2001 Ian Tyers (unpubl. report) had pointed out that the gate timbers of AD 44 from Trench 23 had been about to lose their bark, thus making precise dating impossible. Sadly, such unique evidence as

Trench 32 in phase 2 (later 1st c.) and phase 3 (late 1st to mid 2nd c.)

(It is virtually certain that it will be possible to refine the chronology substantially once the finds have been fully analysed.)



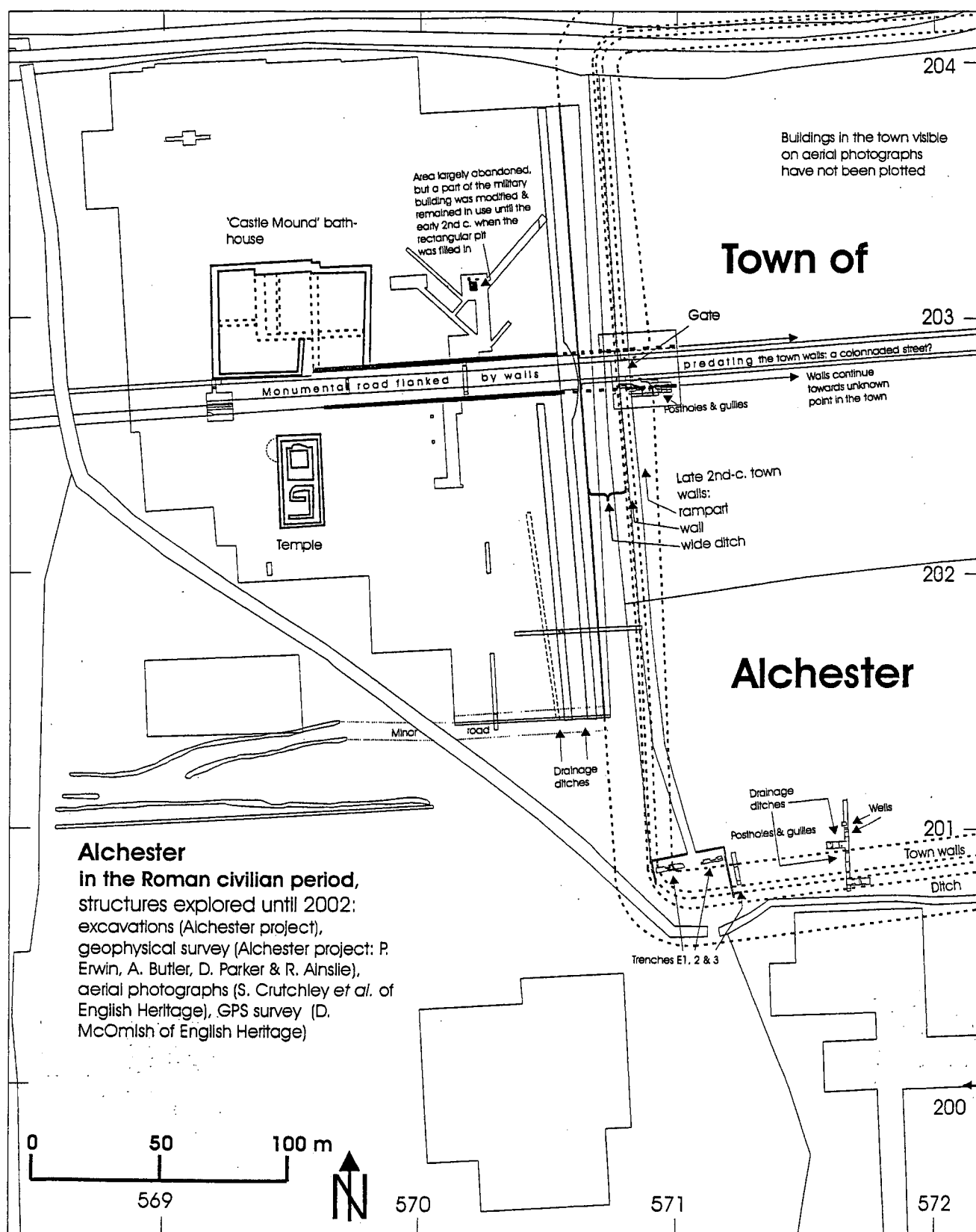


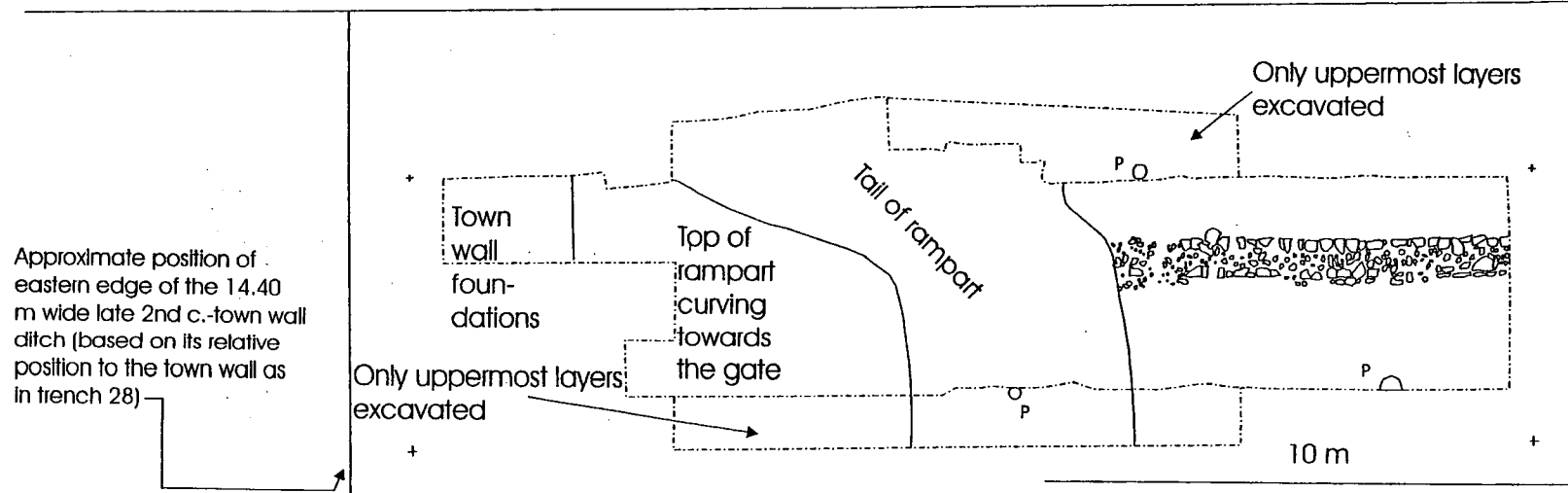
Fig 23.

Trench 32: phase 4: town wall of the late 2nd c. and post holes of the 2nd or subsequent centuries

(No late floor surfaces or complex structures survived in this area)

Location of stone building traced by geophysical and aerial survey

Road



Oxfordshire

dendro-datable wood, plant remains pointing to the otherwise unrecorded early import of new species and artefacts made of organic matter (such as, quite possibly, writing tablets) may no longer be available for future generations unless recovered now.

A colonnaded street(?) and other civilian-period structures (Trench 32)

Evidence for early civilian activity came from the south-east of Trench 32 where a gully and a ditch with organic fill which attests probably that beer had been brewed nearby (Mark Robinson, pers comm.). Later a hearth was built on top of the filled-in ditch and the road from the Castle Mound (a large public stone building, probably a bath-house, west of the town) to the centre of Alchester, was lined on either side by 0.6m wide, well-built walls, 15m (50 Roman feet) apart. We now know that they run for at least 140m, but quite possibly over twice this distance or more if they lead indeed into the centre of the town. Already geophysical survey by Patrick Erwin in 1998 had traced these walls as continuous linear features on either side of the road, and in 1999, 2000 and 2001 we had unearthed sections of these walls in the northern extension of Trench 20 and in Trench 25. Trench 32 has proven that at least the southern wall (and almost certainly its northern counterpart as well) extends into the area later surrounded by town walls and that it predates the construction of the town walls. It is expected that the full analysis of the finds recovered from earlier layers on either side of the walls will yield a fairly precise date for its construction; so far it is safe to date it to the period between the later 1st and the 2nd century. The walls are unlikely to be mere property boundary markers,

- since geophysical survey and excavation have failed to trace any other walls which join up with them,
- since the walls continue towards the centre of the town (though we do not yet know to which point within the town) and
- since they seem to commence in the west precisely in front of a monumental stone building.

The Castle Mound is in the same axis as a temple opposite, and one would like to think that the walls enclose some sort of monumental way connecting this complex with the centre of the town or a specific building within the town. Since there is no obvious practical explanation for the walls, it is tempting to assume that they might have formed part of a colonnaded street, even though this would be highly exceptional for a Romano-British town, let alone a small town like Alchester. Later road-side ditches might easily have destroyed the evidence for stone or timber colonnades, should there ever have been any. Strangely, there is virtually no evidence from our excavation and surveys for civilian stone or even timber buildings in the wet meadow west of Alchester. The temple and Castle Mound seem to have stood in isolation or amidst decaying military timber buildings; parts of the former timber headquarters at least (if this interpretation is correct) were maintained until the early second century. The absence of shops (*tabernae*) or other buildings in Trenches 25 and 29 suggests that the main

function of this potential colonnaded street was to provide a dry passage from the town to the bath-house. Such an architectural feature is, to my knowledge, unique in a British context, and it seems likely that this monument was built with the main purpose to impress. Should this tentative interpretation be correct, then it appears that Alchester enjoyed in the late 1st or early 2nd century sponsorship for an exceptional building programme, followed by a decline to an ordinary small town. We cannot tell whether this unusual architectural feature may have evolved out of a timber colonnade in the main fortress; while colonnades were frequent in Roman fortresses (Pitts and St. Joseph 1985, Petrikovits 1975), there is insufficient evidence to tell whether or not the two large post holes in Trench 32 might have formed part of such a colonnade. Alternatively, veterans of foreign origin in civilian Alchester could have played a part in the introduction of an eastern architectural form.

When the town walls were built in the late 2nd century parts of the earlier wall as well as the early military north-south running drainage ditch were buried beneath the rampart. The rampart and its tail could be shown to curve towards the west gate in the town wall. Military-period objects from the rampart indicate that it consists in part of re-deposited military material.

With the possible exception of three post-holes no significant late Roman features were encountered in this trench. There were no surviving late Roman surfaces, pits or masonry structures. Repeated cleaning of the planum failed to yield post or stake holes with a few exceptions (see plan). While it is not beyond possibility that some small stake holes could have left no traces in the mid-brown matrix, there were no obvious stone concentrations, suggestive of post-packings nor any geometric patterns in the rubble spread to indicate the position of buildings. The town wall itself has been robbed out except for its substantial foundations.

Quintianus - Alchesters first Roman inhabitant or visitor known by name

Roger Ainslie and Lucy Jewitt discovered a bone roundel of 20.5mm diameter with concentric ring design on the obverse in Trench 32. On its reverse the following inscription was incised in two lines:

QVINTI
ANI

The Latin genitive indicates ownership: 'belonging to Quintianus'. We cannot know whether Quintianus was concerned about losing his own game counter(s) or whether marking counters with the names of players was part of a game. A set of twelve such bone counters from London south of the Thames contained besides ten pieces belonging to a certain Sextius, the son of Junius (including one where the name Rufinus was added in the nominative), also two unmarked pieces (RIB 2440.123-32; Sheldon 1974, 100-2; cf. 16). Such inconsistency (also in the ways Sextius wrote

his name) may point to the latter interpretation while the dominance of one name may point to the former. Bone counters were also occasionally used on counting-boards, but this is unlikely to account for a piece with incised name. While this is the first inscribed bone counter, Alchester has yielded several uninscribed counters made of bone and stone. They attest to the popularity of board games. Such games were undoubtedly introduced by the Roman newcomers or through contact with the Empire. Besides Alchester, counters inscribed with names are known from early military sites (where civilians as well as soldiers were present), such as Hod Hill (RIB 2440.98), Chichester (RIB 2440.68) or Vindolanda (*Britannia* 20, 1989, 341 no. 52), but civilians were equally amongst the players. The Alchester counter was found in a context (32.9) above the late 2nd century rampart, but there is much early re-deposited material from civilian levels in Trench 32 and thus we cannot be sure whether Quintianus lived at or visited Alchester in the civilian or military period. The name Quintianus was very common (Kajanto 1965, 35) and widespread in the Latin European and north-African provinces of the Roman Empire (Mocsy *et al* 1983, 239; CIL and RIB indices). We thus do not know whether he was a native Britain who adopted a Roman name or whether he had come from somewhere else in the Latin West of the Empire.

Size and date of the Alchester military base

One of the historically most crucial questions is as yet unresolved: is there merely one compound, dendro-dated to AD 44 or is this merely the annexe to a larger and earlier compound (of AD 43?). In the former case we are probably dealing with a fortress of roughly 8ha size, in the latter with a main fortress of 12-13ha plus an annexe of c 4ha. While it seems most likely that the latter theory is correct, there is still no definite evidence for a certain decision one way or the other. The arguments for and against this hypothesis are summarised below, but further excavation is needed for ultimate clarification and, if the latter theory is correct, for dating the foundation of the main fortress.

Arguments in favour of the theory that there was merely one fortress at Alchester established in AD 44

The west-east road in the western compound forms an axis of symmetry, thus suggesting that it is the *via praetoria*, the road to the main gate. (Though it would have made perfect sense to build an annexe symmetrically along an extension of the *via principalis*, for two units of 500 men each, for example.)

If there are no traces of a gate, one would have expected an empty space (*intervallum*) in Trench 32. (Though most, but not all Roman forts and fortresses have an *intervallum* [ie a cordon around the perimeter] without buildings to facilitate movement in case of an enemy attack and to make the effective use of missiles or fire more difficult. The contemporary fort at Oberstimm, for example, has a densely built-up *intervallum* [Schoenberger 1978, 19 fig. 5]. If there was indeed a fortress with annexe at Alchester, there would no longer have been the necessity to keep the *intervallum* at the side of the annexe free from buildings. Furthermore, if the tentative interpretation of the western beamslots in Trench 32 as part of a wooden ramp onto the rampart, should be correct, then this would not exclude the possibility that there was an *intervallum* by-and-large free from buildings.)

There is a road within the town in the same alignment as the southern ditches of the western compound. It may re-use its ditches, thus indicating that there was only one compound, parts of which underlie the area later enclosed with a town wall. (However, this road has been excavated in Trench 21 where it is just south of the outer ditch, probably for sheer convenience: the existing ditch would have provided drainage, and roads often follow boundaries to cause minimum inconvenience for agriculture. The same alignment could have been maintained within the town.)

The two parallel walls from the Castle Mound to the

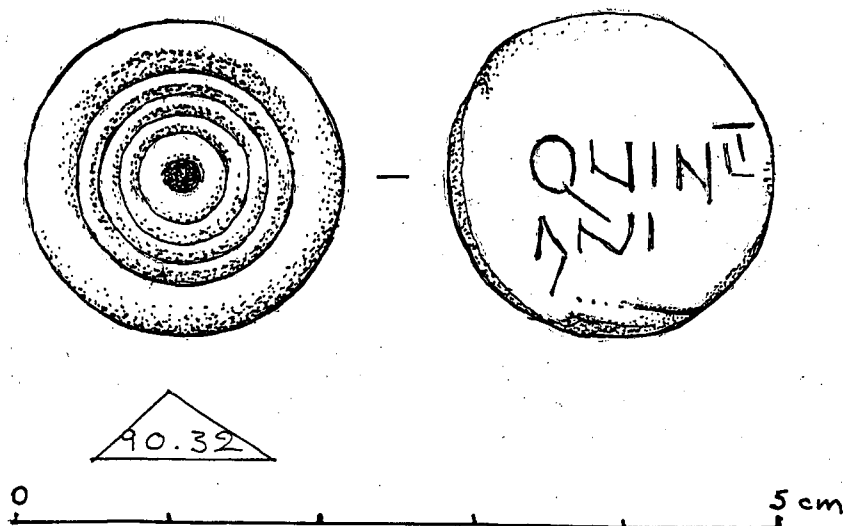


Fig 25. The inscribed bone roundel drawn by Vanda Morton; scale: 1:2

Oxfordshire

centre of the town might suggest that in the civilian period areas west and east of the line of the later town wall were considered a unity (though this would not be incompatible with the annexe theory - as main fortress and annexe must have formed a unity as well).

Arguments in favour of the theory that there was a main fortress (of AD 43?) and an annexe of AD 44

The location of the parade ground to the south-east of the later town is easier to explain if the centre of the complex was underneath the town rather than at its western margins.

The west-east running drainage channel in Trench 32 has a clear gradient from west to east while the contemporary drainage ditch, sectioned in Trenches 22 and 31 flows in the opposite direction. As there is no natural ridge in this area, there must have been an artificial obstacle between them, probably the rampart of the main fortress.

The *principia* in the western compound (if this interpretation is accepted) with its front facing south, (i.e. away from the side of the enemy) is hard to reconcile with the assumption that this was the only military compound. If so, one would have expected the *principia* to be at the T-junction of the two main roads as in most other forts and fortresses of the time. In an annexe, by contrast, there would have been just one road, thus explaining the unusual position.

It seems unlikely (though it would not be without parallels) that the remarkably rectangular groundplan of Alchester derives from a civilian foundation built from scratch (re-using at most one eighth of the ditches of a pre-existing compound of similar size). It makes more sense to assume that Alchester inherited its rectangular groundplan from a fortress underneath its walls and that as much as possible of the military ditches was re-used to save labour.

Excavations in 1920s and 1974 yielded ditches with mid-1st century fill near the north-east corner and the east side of the town walls.

At the central crossroads in Alchester the road from Dorchester does not line up with the T-junction of the other three roads, suggesting that it was a later addition and that Alchester inherited the typical T-junction from its military predecessor. The *via praetoria* thus faced north (ie towards the enemy).

Akeman Street and not the road leading through the west gate of Alchester westwards became the main traffic axis, suggesting that perhaps already in the military period the main road (*via praetoria*) led to Akeman Street rather than to the west, which would be true for a fortress under the later town, but not for the western compound.

The gully supplying the water basin in Trench 26 is curving slightly from east to west suggesting that it was supplied by a pre-existing system from the main fortress in the east.

Mid-1st century finds have been found from numerous trenches within the town in the excavations in the 1920s as well in our excavations. This is probably re-deposited material from an earlier military occupation (covering all of the later town).

The location of the granary outside the southern defences of the western compound forms still the strongest argument against its interpretation as the sole fortress.

Geophysical survey of the Banjo enclosure

David Parker carried out a resistivity survey of the Banjo enclosure, clearly showing the access route, the enclosure ditch and the two circular ditches (thought to surround Iron Age round houses). This survey will hopefully form the basis for future excavations.

Possible discovery of the southern defences of the main fortress

A resistivity survey south of the Gagle Brook may have traced the southern fortress ditches some 64.5m and 70m south of the stream. However, further survey or excavation will be needed to exclude the possibility that we are dealing with the ditches of a minor road. If these are indeed the southern fortress ditches, they would explain the location of granary which extends beyond the limits of the later town walls. The Gagle Brook appears to have been diverted, presumably in the Roman civilian period; it is now certainly cutting off the south-west corner of the former annexe and, presumably, also the southernmost part of the main fortress. Its water appears to have been channelled into the town wall ditch thus giving the town a moat-like appearance. If the double ditch represents indeed the southern defences of main fortress then this would be about 12 to 13ha large (or 16 to 17ha with the annexe - ie as large as the small legionary fortress at Exeter).

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WALLINGFORD BURH TO BOROUGH RESEARCH PROJECT: FIRST INTERIM REPORT, 2002

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Introduction

In August 2002 the pilot field season of a new archaeological project was undertaken at the town of Wallingford, located alongside the Thames in south Oxfordshire. Titled The Wallingford Burh to Borough Research Project, this proposed five-year programme will combine a variety of approaches in order to illuminate more of this highly significant historic townscape and its setting. The project team combines expertise drawn from a number of academic institutions with interests spanning early Medieval and

Medieval urban and rural settlement; it includes professional field staff, and is working closely with local historical, archaeological and conservation bodies (notably The Wallingford Historical and Archaeological Society, Wallingford Museum, The Northmoor Trust); the project is supported by the South Oxfordshire District Council and Wallingford Town Council and liaises with the County Archaeologist. Funding for the 2002 season came from the British Academy and the Medieval Settlement Research Group. English Heritage kindly granted the licence for the geophysical survey work across the selected Scheduled Areas of the site.

Wallingford: Site and Previous Archaeology

The town of Wallingford is justly renowned for its surviving late Saxon burh and Medieval rampart-ditch defences and for the complex and extensive earthworks of a Norman castle imposed into the north-east quarter of the urban space (both are Scheduled Ancient Monuments). Its riverside position, overseeing a ford across the Thames, gave Wallingford a highly strategic role at the Wessex-Mercia border; the river and local communications routes also allowed Wallingford to prosper as a royal centre after the late 11th century (see Historical Context below). Its eventual decline in importance was the result of the growth of Reading abbey and town to the south and of Oxford to the north and due also to changes in the role and navigability of the river (Britnell 2000: 123; Keene 2000: 555).

The preservation of town rampart (on both west and north-west flanks) and castle earthworks makes Wallingford of central importance for examining the nature of late Saxon town planning and Norman urban castle building. It is frequently cited as a key early Medieval centre (Astill 2000: 36, 41) and was highlighted thus in the 1975 Historic Towns in Oxfordshire survey: The importance of Wallingford's archaeology is only heightened by comparison with the other towns, for (apart from Oxford) it is the only late Saxon walled town in the region. Late Saxon and early Medieval layers are unlikely to be stratified deep beneath or destroyed by later archaeological deposits as they frequently are in Oxford. Some [unpublished] archaeological work has already taken place on the castle and the defences, but many components of the early town, like the domestic and industrial buildings, the churches, the street plan and the waterfront remain unstudied. Because there is still so much to be learnt about this period, large scale work on any of these aspects is likely to produce results of national importance (Airs *et al* 1975: 157).

This quote identifies various problems: a high importance and potential, and little actual study. Indeed, the archaeological interventions noted as unpublished in 1975 remain unpublished, meaning that the data available float. The excavations did certainly identify something of the archaeological potential: work in the 1960s on the former north gate (later buried by extensions to the castle earthworks), and within the castle inner bailey both identified excellent preservation of archaeological deposits, revealing (respectively) 10th century and later buildings and